

THE FIGHTER

A Romance With a Strange
Hero of the Battling Breed

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

CHAPTER I.
Caleb Conover Wins.

HE red-haired man was fighting. He had always been fighting. The square jaw, the bull neck proclaimed him of the battling breed; even before one had scope to note the alert, light eyes, the tight mouth, the short, broad hands with their stubby strength of finger.

In prize ring, in medieval battle field, in longshore tavern, Caleb Conover would have slugged his way to supremacy. In business he won as readily—and by like methods. He was not only the force but also the supreme craft of the fighter. Therefore he was president, instead of bouncer, in the offices of the C. G. & X. Railroad.

It was not railroad business that engrossed Conover as he sat at his desk one day in early spring, tearing open a ceaseless series of telegrams, scribbling replies, ringing now and then for a messenger to whom he gave a curt order.

Telegrams and messages ceased. In the full Conover jumped to his feet and began to walk back and forth. His big hands were clenched, his head thrust forward, his whole muscle-bound body tense.

Then began a violent ringing from the long-distance telephone in the far corner of the room. Conover picked up the receiver, grunted a question, then listened. For nearly five minutes he stood thus, the receiver at his ear, his broad, freckled face impassive save for a growing fire in the pale, alert eyes. A grunt of dismissal and the receiver was hung on its hook.

Conover crossed the room, threw himself into a big, creaking chair, cocked his feet on the window sill, drew out and lighted a fat cigar. The tenseness was gone. His whole body was relaxed. He smoked mechanically and let his gaze rove with dull indifference over the blank wall across the street. He was resting as hard as he had fought.

A clerk timidly opened the door leading from the outer offices. "Mr. Caine, sir," ventured the employee, "He says he's here." "Send him in," growled Conover, without turning his head. His eyes were still fixed in unseeing comfort on the wall when his guest entered. Not did he shift his glance without visible reluctance. The newcomer, seemingly used to his host's lack of cordiality. For, favoring Conover with a slight nod, he deposited his hat, gloves and stick on the table and lighted a cigarette before speaking.

Conover surveyed the well-dressed figure of his visitor with an air of unconcerning appraisal that reached its climax as he noted the cigarette. "Here!" he suggested. "Throw away that paper link between fire and a fool, and smoke real tobacco. Try one of these cigars if you want. They'll fit your mouth a lot better. Why does a grown man smoke at?"

"This grown man," replied Caine, untroubled, "has a way of doing what he chooses. I came to see if you were ready to go to your execution."

"Execution?" cried Conover. "What's just the words that there may be a little execution done, up there. But I won't be the gent with his head on the block. Besides, you're an hour early."

"I know I am. It's an ideal day for my work. So I haven't done any. I left the office ahead of time and came to see if I could lure you into a corner before you go to your room. You don't seem much worried over the outcome."

"Why should I be? I'll win. I always win," said Caine, observing his friend with the condescendingly interested air of a visitor at the Zoo. "If I had your sublime contempt I'd be President of the United States. I'm the richest man in America, or some other such odious personage whose shoes we all secretly fear we may some day fill."

"Richest man?" repeated Conover, mildly attracted by the dual idea. "Give me time and I'll likely be both. I've made a little start on the second already, to-day."

"Yes, a big one. The biggest yet, by far."

"Nothing to do with Steeloid, I suppose," suggested the visitor, a note of real eagerness peering through his customary air of amused calm.

"All about Steeloid," returned Conover. "The Independent Steeloid company is incorporated at last. Capitalized at—"

"The Independent! That means a slump in our U. S. Steeloid. You call that winning a fight off, Caine, if you leave the thinking part of these things to me. Thinkin' is my game. Not yours. You talk about U. S. Steeloid. You mean to say I've got seventy-two per cent. of the stock and you own just what I let you in on."

"Never mind all that," interposed Caine. "If the Independents are banded together they'll make things warm for us."

"Not enough to cause any hurry call for electric fans, I guess," chuckled Conover. "If you'll listen to me, I'll try to explain. An' maybe I can hammer into your head a few of the million things you don't know about finance. Here's the idea. I built up the Steeloid Trust, didn't I? And Blacard and his crowd who had been running a bunch of money third rate Steeloid companies, got up a equal because I could undersell 'em."

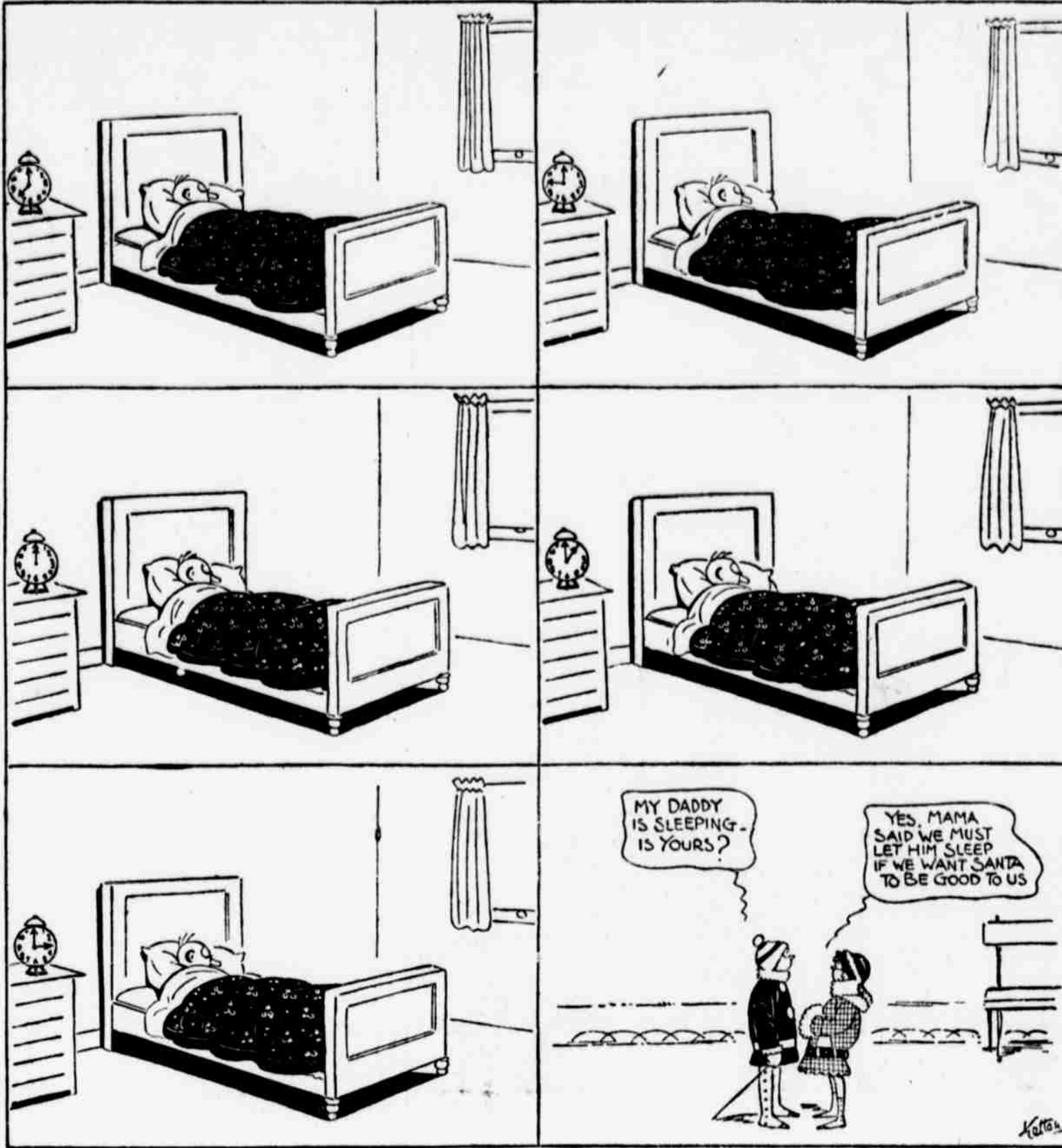
"Go on," urged Caine. "I know all that. You needn't take a running start with your lessons in an' come. We'll take it for granted that I read at least the newspaper I own, and that I know Blacard has been trying to organize the independent companies against you. What next?"

"Well, they're organized. Only Blacard didn't do it. A high-souled philanthropic geometer that worked through agents, lunched in an' come, bled all the independent companies against us an' got 'em to give him full voting power on all their stock. Put themselves into his hands entirely, you see, for the fight against Steeloid Trust. Then this noble hearted trust incorporated the Independents. The deal went through to-day. I got final word on it just now. The Independents are organized. The votes on every share of their stock is in the control of one man."

The Day of Rest

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By Maurice Ketten



exactly beloved by them in future?" "I'm not expectin' a loving cup with a round-robin of their names on it. Not just at first, anyhow. So don't waste any worry on me. The club's only the first step, anyhow. The real fun's liable to come when I take another."

"Peculiarly," counseled Caine. "People have a way of forgetting a man is nouveau riche as long as he remembers it. But they remember it as soon as he forgets it. Is it difficult to ask what Miss Shevlin lives on all this? Is she in sympathy with your social antics—I mean ambitions?"

"I don't know. I never asked her. I never thought of it. But if I did, she'd stand for it. You see, not being old and as wise as some of the Granite folks, she's fallen into the habit of thinkin' I'm just about all right. It's kind of nice to have some one feel that way about you."

"You seem to return the compliment. I don't blame you. It isn't every man who finds himself guardian to a girl as lovely as Miss Shevlin. I'm lying back to watch for the time when some scared youth comes to ask your leave to marry her."

"What's that?" snarled Conover, stopping and glowering up at the tall, clean-cut figure at his side.

"Don't get excited," laughed Caine. "You can't expect as lovely and lovable a girl as Miss Shevlin to live on all this. If you're so opposed to this imaginary suit I've conjured up, why not marry her yourself?"

"Marry? That kid? Me? Sputtered Conover. "Why, I'm past thirty—an' she ain't twenty yet. Besides, I'm a daddy to her. If I hear of you or any one else queerin' that kid's fondness for me by any such fool talk I'll—"

"Her father was wise in appointing you her guardian," mocked Caine. "In the absence of a boy, he's got to have a substitute. You're an ideal Dragon. I remember old Shevlin. A first rate contractor and ward politician; but the last sort of man to have such a daughter. As for Billy, now—he's the model of his father. A tougher little chap and a greater contrast to his sister could hardly be imagined."

"She takes after her mother," explained Conover, puffing mightily at a recalcitrant cigar. "Mother was French. Came of good people, I hear. Named her girl Desiree. French name. Kind of pretty name, too. Died when Billy was born. I s'pose that's why the boy was named for his dad. Instead of being called Pe-air or Jussup or some other current trademark. That's why he's tough too. Desiree was brought up, Billy's bringing himself up. Same as I did. It's the best trainin' a boy can have. So I let him go his own gait, an' I pay for the window he smashes."

"How did Old Man Shevlin happen to have the house? What was he?" "None but the aunt the kids live with. I s'pose he liked me an' thought I'd give the girl a fair show. An' I have. Convent school, music an' foreign lingo an' all that rot. An' she's worth it. I'm payin' the Hawarden, too, on the sly, to get her into society. In the Evening World's 'COMPLETE NOVEL EACH WEEK' series is the foremost work of such 'best-seller' authors as Robert W. Chambers, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Rupert Hughes, James Oliver Curwood, Morgan Robertson, Margaret Widdemer, George Randolph Chester, Louis Joseph Vance, Edgar Rice Burroughs and many others of equal celebrity."

"How about Billy?" "That's to concern of mine. He gets his clothes an' grub an' goes to public school. It's all any boy's got a right to ask."

"Then you're doing all this on the money that Shevlin left?" "Sure! You don't s'pose I'd waste my own cash on 'em?" "What a clumsy Jew you are!" observed Caine, admiringly. "What are you drivin' at?" demanded Conover. "Only this: The wills and some other documents filed at the Hall of Records are copied by our men and kept on file in our office. I happened to be going over one of the books the other day and I ran across a copy of old Shevlin's will. There was a certificate of effects with it. He left just \$1,100, or, to be accurate, \$1,098.75."

"Well," echoed Caine, "the rent of the house where Miss Shevlin lives, her two servants and her food must come to several times that sum each year, to say nothing of the expenses and the support of the aunt, who lives with her. None of those are on the free. You're an awfully white chip, Conover. You went up about fifty points in my admiration when I read that will. Now don't look as if I'd caught you stealing sheep. It's a shame to let a fellow like you live on a pile of money like that. You're a pirate like you can really once in your life give something for nothing. There's the house. Don't forget you're due at the club in fifty minutes."

Conover, red, confused, angry, mumbled a word of goodbye and ran up the steps of a pretty cottage that stood in its own grounds just off the street they were traversing.

Caine watched the Fighter's bulky form vanish within the doorway. Then he lighted a fresh cigarette and strolled on.

"I wonder," he mused, "what his growing list of financial victims would say if they knew that Bruce Conover worships as ideally and reverently as a Galahad at the shrine of a little flower-faced nineteen-year-old girl? But he added, in dismissal of the quaint theme, "no one of them all would be half so surprised to know it as Conover himself!"

CHAPTER II.

The Girl.

CONOVER lounged back and forth in the pretty little reception room of Desiree Shevlin's house, halting now and then to glance with puzzled approval at some item of furnishings. The room—the whole house

—was to him a mystery. Contentedly devoid of taste though he was, the man dimly realized the charm of the place and the dainty perfection of its appointments. That Desiree had accomplished this in no way astonished him. For he believed her quite capable of any minor miracle. But in it all he took a pride that had voiced itself once in the comment:

"I don't see how you could make a room look so nice without a single tidy or even a bow fastened up anywhere. But why did you get those dull old tiles for your mantle? I wouldn't a' kicked at payin' for the best marble."

To-day Conover gave less than usual homage to the apartment. He was agog to tell its owner his wonderful tidings, and he chafed at her delay in appearing. At last she came—the one person on earth who could have kept Caleb Conover waiting, without paying, by sharp reproach for the delay.

"I'm sorry I was so long," she began as she brushed the curtains aside and hurried in. "But Billy and I couldn't agree on the joys of tubbing. I'd hate to have anything as much as he hates his bath. Now you've had some good luck! Glorious, scrumptious good luck! I can tell by the way you're mustache is all chewed. You only chew it when you're excited. And you are only excited when something good has happened. Isn't it clever of me to know that? I ought to write it up 'Facial Fur as a Bliss Barometer.' How—oh, I didn't mean to be silly when you're bawling with news. Please be good and tell me. Is it anything about Steeloid?"

"It's all about Steeloid," he answered. "I've won out—I've made my pile!"

She caught both his hands in hers with a gesture almost awkward in its happy impulsiveness. "Oh, I'm so glad! So glad!" she cried. "Tell me!"

Boysishly, bluntness, eagerly, Conover repeated his story.

His florid face was alight, enthusiasm welling choking him. She heard him out with an excitement almost as great as his own. As he finished she clapped her hands with a little laugh of utter delight.

"Oh, splendid!" she exclaimed. "No one but you would ever have thought of it. It's—her flush of pleasure yielding momentarily to a look of troubled generosity—"It's perfectly honest, of course."

"It's business," he replied. "That's the same thing, I suppose," she said, much relieved. "And you're rich?" "A million, anyway. And you?" "Well!"

"No!" corrected Desiree, judicially. "More like thousand. Why? There's something very sweet and melting about them. And, besides, you mustn't run him down. He's very nice to me. Last night he asked me to marry him. What do you think of that? Honestly, he did."

"The measly he-doll! I wish I'd broke him a year ago instead of waiting for the Steeloid. Sure! What'd you say when he asked you?" "You face gets such a curious shade of magenta when you are angry. Caleb," mused Desiree, looking at him critically, her head on one side. "But it doesn't match your hair a little bit. There, I didn't mean to tease you. Yes, I did mean it, too. But I'm sorry. I told him I couldn't marry him, of course."

"Good work!" approved Caleb. "What'd he say then?" "He—asked if I'd try to look

both turned at the wonder-inspired, sulphurous monosyllable. Desiree jerked the curtain aside, revealing a stocky small boy, very red of face, who was clutching a blue bath robe about him and had no apparent aim in life save to escape from the situation in which his involuntary explosive had betrayed him.

"Now don't go callin' me down, Dey," he pleaded. "I just happened to be going past—I was on the way to take my bath, all right—on the level I was an' I heard Mr. Conover say 'dull old tiles for your mantle.' I about havin' a million. An'—an'—I spoke without thinkin'."

He had been edging toward the stair-foot as he talked. Now, finding the lower step behind him, he fled upward on patterning, desperate feet. "Poor Billy!" laughed Desiree. "He's an awfully good little chap. But he will listen. I can't break him of it."

"Maybe I could," hazarded Conover. "You'd break his neck and his heart at the same time. Leave him to me. Nothing but kindness does any good where he is concerned."

"Ever try a bala-stick?" suggested Caleb. "That will do!" she replied. "Now, I want to hear more about Steeloid. Poor Mr. Blacard! It's pretty baggy for him, isn't it?"

"If haggor means he's got it in the neck, it is." "Haggor?" explained Desiree, loftily. "Means anything horrid. I know, because I made it up. It's such a comfort to make up words. Because then, you see, you can give them meanings as you go along. It saves a lot of bother. Did you ever try it?"

"No," said Conover, apologetically. "I'm afraid I never did. Maybe I could, though, if it'd make a hit with you. But you were talkin' about Blacard. You said he was wastin' sympathy on him, was you?"

"I'm sorry for any one that gets the worst of it. But—"

"But no sorrier for Blacard than you would be for anybody else?" "Of course, not. Why?" "He comes here a lot. Twice I've met him here. Is he stuck on you?"

"I think he is." "I guess most people are," sighed Caleb. "Don't blame him, so long as you don't care about him. You don't do you?" he finished, anxiously. "He's very handsome," she observed, demurely.

"Well—pretty handsome." "Is he?" "I've heard girls say so." "More like thousand. Why? There's something very sweet and melting about them. And, besides, you mustn't run him down. He's very nice to me. Last night he asked me to marry him. What do you think of that? Honestly, he did."

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COMPLETE NOVEL IN THE EVENING WORLD FOR CHRISTMAS WEEK

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

By CHARLES DICKENS

on him as a brother—a dear brother, and he's broke!"

"She broke off with a reminiscent laugh. "Well, what did you say?" "I'm afraid I was a little rude. But I didn't mean to be. I'd heard a smothered giggle from over in the corner. So I told him if I'd really had any use for a brother—a dear brother, I could reach right behind the divan and get one. He stared over to the divan. And sure enough, there, behind the cushions, was Billy, all wadded up in a little heap. He—"

"All—what?" asked the perplexed Conover, pausing in the midst of a Homeric guffaw. "Wadded up—like this—crumpling her ten fingers into a white, compact little bunch. "Mr. Blacard was very angry. He went away."

"She joined for an instant in Conover's laughter; then checked herself with a stamp of her foot. "Stop!" she ordered. "I'm a little beast to behave so. He—s'posed for me, he asked me to marry him. There ought to be something sacred in all that. And here I am making fun of him. Caleb, please say something to make me more ashamed."

"You're all right, girl!" chuckled Caleb, in huge delight. "Poor pink-an-white Blacard! You were—" "I wasn't! I ought to be ashamed for tellin' you that. But—somehow, I seem to tell you everything. Honestly, I wouldn't tell any one else. Honestly! You know that, don't you?"

"I know you're the whitest, brightest, jolliest kid that ever happened," returned Conover, "but you needn't bother about Blacard. I won't tell. Now I've got to get out."

"Aren't you going to take me for a walk or a drive or anything? It's such a gorgeous day, and it's so early. Almost as early as it ever gets to be. I about havin' a million. An'—an'—I spoke without thinkin'."

He stopped, thoroughly uncomfortable, yet vaguely glad of having eased his mind of his worry for her prospects. She was frowning up at him with all the menacing ferocity of an Angora kitten.

"Caleb!" she repeated, in stern rebuke. "Aren't you ashamed? Aren't you ashamed? Say you are! Now go and stand in the corner. If I ever hear you talk that way about my dear little sister, I'll—"

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Sort of man that's so stiff he never unbends and he's broke!"

"I think I've met him," reflected Desiree. "Doesn't he look just a little like a rail? Gray and long and mossy—with a sort of home-made face? And one eye that toes in just a little?"

"That's the man," grinned Caleb, in high approval. "There's two kinds of financiers—the thick-necked, red-faced kind, with chests that have slipped down, and the cold gray kind. Gray hair, gray eyes, gray skin, gray clothes an' gray mistakes. Gray souls, too. That sort never takes on weight. An' there's just enough humanness in their faces to put you in mind of the North Pole. Thank the Lord, I'm one of the thick, red breed."

"Do you mean all over or just your head?" queried Desiree, innocently, as she glanced at his stiff, carrot hair. "Oh, it's awfully nice of you to laugh at my poor little jokes. I wonder what you'd do if you ever met a really clever woman?"

"I s'pose I'd begin figurin' out how stupid she'd frame up alongside of you," he answered, simply. "You see, I—"

"You were talking about Mr. Standish. Is he going to vote for you?" "As I loaned him bank \$26,000 last year when it was shaky from a run, I guess he's not. But he's a real grateful. But his bank's in a bad way again and he's liable to need me."

"So you are going to discount his future gratitude?" "Just so. He needs me. An' I need him. Not only for to-day, but for a plan I've been thinkin' over."

"I wish I could help you with him. I've met his daughter, Letty, once or twice. They say she's married for Mr. Caine. Mrs. Hawarden tells me they've been in love with each other ever since she stopped playing with dolls. I should have hated to give up dolls just in time for Mr. Caine. Are there any more governors?"

"A few. None that you know. I must be off. Now, remember, you aren't to worry. It's all right. I wouldn't bother to keep in the club if it was like most places of that kind. But it isn't. The Arareek's an institution in Granite. If you ain't in it, you ain't merited. At Ladies' Days an' times like that the good people always show up. It's a good thing to belong. Besides, a fellow gets in on a level. He's a canny joinin'."

"I never knew what real loneliness was till I went to a few of their Ladies' Days an' Field Days. I might as well call it a desert to me. You poor boy! It's a burning shame! Why do you?"

"Oh, it ain't always goin' to be like that. Don't be sorry about it. I'll whip 'em till they're in a daze. The scolding, clear son-of-a-bitch broke in on his boast. Beginning with a faint, barely audible trill, it rose in a glorious, piercing crescendo of melody, but vibrated across a whole octave, then ceased as abruptly as it had begun."

Caleb turned toward the window between whose curtains swung a cat. The occupant of a deal of gold, silver, brass an' gray-green, hopped self-importantly from perch to perch, nervously delighted with the many scrutiny.

"Hello!" said Conover. "When'd you get that? I never saw him before."

"He came yesterday," explained Desiree. "Isn't he a little darling? Jack Hawarden sent him to me."

"You mean to say he's mean to say he's stuck on you, too? Why, he's barely twenty-one an' he can't see his own liver!"

"With a measure, Caleb, to hear your fulsome praise of the men I happen to know. First Mr. Blacard, and now—"

"That's what's called 'sarcasm,' ain't it?" said Conover. "I didn't mean to rile you. I guess young Hawarden's all right—as far as college let him learn to be. What's the bird's name? Or don't birds have names?"

"Why? You've got a right to ask him? How would 'Steeloid' do?" Caleb's grin of genuine delight at the suggestion made her add quickly, with a note of truth. "I did it."

"I wish I'd thought of that before. How silly of me not to! For, you see, he's already named now."

"Oh, he is, hey?" said the discomfited Conover. "Who named him? Hawarden?"

"No. Billy and I. His name's Slegfried Mickey."

"That's a crazy name for a—"

"Yes, isn't it? That's why I like it so. Billy wanted to call him 'Mickey' after the bulldog he used to have. And I wanted to call him Slegfried Mickey. He's a dear. He knows his name already. Don't you, Slegfried Mickey?"

The bird, thus assured, maintained a steady, uncommittal stare at the two. "See?" triumphed Desiree. "Silence gives assent. He's a heavenly little singer. Why, only this morning he sang all the first bar of 'The Death of Ase.'"

"The Death of Ase." In the Peer Gynt suite, you know?"

"Oh, yes. Of course. Sure!" murmured Caleb, hastily. "I was thinkin' of some other fellow's suite. An' he sang that, did he? Clever little cuss!"

"Wasn't he though? And he'd only heard me play it once."

"Pretty hard thing to sing, too!"

"Caleb Conover," she rebuked, in cold admonition. "Look at me! No, the every one that hears me sing have I told you just as if I was a child. Why do you pretend to know about the Death of Ase? You dear old simple hearted thing! You don't know I always find you out when you try to—"

"I didn't want you to think I wasn't up on the things that interest you, girl," he pleaded. "I'm intent to feel your pulse. I'll talk down to me every time you speak about music or litter-chor or those things. An'—Lord! but I do hate to let on when I don't understand a thing!"

"You understand more of the real things—the things that are worth while—than any other man alive," she protested. "Now say goodbye and run on, or you'll be late. Don't forget to stop on the way back and let me know whether the lions eat Daniel or if Daniel!"

"Eats the lions? I don't know who Daniel is, but this ain't got to be a show killin' contest. An' I never was built to play the allsorts' role of sheep. No you can't finger out who'll be killed an' when! Get the job you know!"

(To Be Continued.)

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